Telecollaboration: Synchronous Oral Exchanges through Skype in the Classroom

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Abstract

Recent research has concentrated on the advantages the use of e-mail, written chat and virtual communities have for language learning as a way to create authentic communicative environments (Vinagre, 2005; Meskill and Anthony, 2005). The benefits of text chat have been lauded by research but there is an obvious lack of studies on synchronous oral chat, which resembles even more closely face-to-face communication. In this paper, we report on an experience based on the integration of synchronous oral chat into a language course and compare the oral proficiency of students using this option to students doing face-to-face speaking activities. We also analyse students' responses to this new technology and the teacher's perceptions of improvements on oral production, time on task and language production during the exchanges.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a rapid growth of interest in the use of technology in many areas of teaching and learning as well as a lot of research on the possibilities and advantages such technology can offer to language learning.

Recent research has concentrated on the advantages the use of e-mail, written chat and virtual communities have for language learning as a way to create authentic communicative environments (Vinagre, 2005; Meskill and Anthony, 2005). Research comparing written chat rooms (Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication) and classroom face-to-face interaction suggest there is greater equity in participation (Warschauer, 1996), improved attitudes towards language learning (Kern, 1995), greater or at least equal oral improvement (Kost,

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2004), and thus, cross-modality transfer of skill from chatting to oral proficiency development (Abrams, 2003).

Even though text chat is lauded for resembling face-to-face interaction and shares some of its benefits, synchronous oral exchanges resemble even more closely face-to-face communication, especially regarding repair moves, turn adjacency conventions and discourse coherence structures (Jepson, 2005). However and unlike text chat, there is nearly no research on the use of synchronous real talk for language learning.

2. The Project

2.1. Background

At the Public University of Navarre, a needs analysis questionnaire to detect our students' needs is administered every year. Speaking has always been the skill most demanded so that it could be concluded that our students feel they have a low competency in speaking English. Surprisingly, while doing speaking activities in class, they are not on task but talk about other things in Spanish, or switch to Spanish as soon as they have a problem, or do the activities just trying to finish them as soon as possible and thus not practising much.

As this was the case and we felt our students were not getting enough speaking practice, we started a project with a Turkish university doing oral exchanges using Skype, a free telephone program to be used in computers. The project started in the academic year 2005–2006.

The purpose of the project was to provide "real" speaking practice, as they had to talk to a Turkish partner through earphones and a microphone, to see whether this kind of oral practice had any impact in their achievement grades, and whether there was any evidence of transference of skills from oral to written proficiency achievement.

2.2. Method

2.2.1. Context

At the Public University of Navarre, in Technical Agriculture Engineering –a three-year degree– English is a compulsory subject in the third year of the degree and it has four and a half credits, equivalent to three hours of class in the second semester (February to May) of the academic year. One hour of theory class and two hours of practical class.

The main objective of the subject is to improve the students' proficiency in the four skills so that they can finish the degree with an advanced level of English.

The subject focuses mainly on developing specific language related to Agriculture, as it will be their main lexical field and it is taught using material from the Internet so the students also develop computer skills. All the skills are worked on in class. Reading and listening comprehension are developed by reading specific texts dealing with agriculture topics such as soils, weeds, pests etc. and listening to lectures dealing with the same topics. Written expression is developed in the answers to the reading comprehension exercises, writing a project based on specialized articles and by some specific tasks written in the practice classes using the grammar points taught in the theory hour. Speaking was dealt with through simulations and some problem-solving activities set in class.

Although the lecturers were satisfied with the design of the course, there was a perceived need to improve the speaking activities, as the students were not participating, and thus not practising enough. It was also felt that there might be other ways to practise the language closer to real life communication.

2.2.2. The Profile of participants

The participants in the project were 23 undergraduates from the Public University of Navarre and 22 undergraduates from the Middle East Technical University in Turkey. The first had English as a compulsory subject in a Technical Degree in Agriculture and the second were doing a course in Oral Communication in English and

were pre-service teachers of English. The level of the first group was low intermediate to upper-intermediate while the level of the second group was from upper-intermediate to advanced. Both groups were from 20 to 23 years old and had no other contact with English apart from the class. The level of motivation in both groups was also quite different. The agriculture students' level of motivation was lower as English is not their main field of expertise as it is in the case of the Turkish students, whose major is English and the focus of the class communication.

2.2.3. Method

A group of 23 students was the experimental group and a group of 24 students the control group. Both groups followed the same syllabus except for the oral exchanges. The control group did speaking activities for half an hour every fortnight and the experimental group did the oral exchange for the same amount of time. Both groups were taught by the same lecturer, who is also the researcher.

2.2.4. Research questions

The research questions were:

1. Would the oral exchanges be as effective as problem-solving speaking activities or more effective in promoting speaking proficiency?
2. Would the students speak and negotiate meaning more in the oral exchanges than in the problem-solving speaking activities?
3. Would the oral exchanges have any effect in their achievement grades at the end of the semester?
4. Would there be any transfer from oral to written proficiency achievement?
5. Would the oral exchanges improve their motivation and create a higher feeling of improvement?

2.2.5.Quantitative data

Proficiency level pre-and post-tests were administered to the groups to compare the experimental and the control group achievements. Class work, a written project and a Power Point oral

presentation were also graded and the mean and the standard deviation of those grades compared in both groups.

2.2.6. Qualitative data

Records were kept on the evolution of the language produced in the exchanges and in the oral activities in class. The students wrote diaries about the experience and filled a 4-item questionnaire about the exchange. In the diaries, they had to explain their experiences in the exchanges and a last entry reflecting on the exchanges and mentioning the best and worst aspect. The questionnaire rated in a 4 point scale ranging from "Nothing" to "Very good" students' satisfaction with the exchange, their perceived improvement, the likelihood of future use and their sense of fulfilment of a perceived need.

2.2.7. Data analysis

All the quantitative data were analysed using SSPS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and Pearson's correlation coefficient. Qualitative data were studied through content analysis looking for common positive and negative aspects of the exchanges and through percentages in the 4 rating items of the questionnaire.

3. Results

As it can be seen in the following table, the control group had higher scores both in the written project and the oral presentation but the experimental group had higher scores in the test even though the pre-test mean had been lower. This seems to suggest that the experimental group's level improved more and their standard deviation also decreased so their level was more evenly distributed after the exchanges. As regards oral improvement it could be deduced from the results that the experimental group's level improved less than the control group, as their scores in the oral presentation were lower. However, it should be borne in mind that the experimental group's initial level was considerably lower, so some improvement is suggested.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Scores in Written Project, Oral Presentation, Pre and Post-test of Control and Experimental Group

	Written Project	Oral Presentation	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean Control	7.8	7.3	4.5	5.1
SD Control	0.8	1.1	0.8	0.6
Mean Experimental	7.3	6.8	4.2	5.3
SD Experimental	1	0.9	1	0.8

When analysing the data with the Pearson's correlation coefficient to see the relation between the different factors, some interesting facts appeared. As it can be seen in the following table, the only significant relation was between class work and the written project and only for the experimental group and between the post-test and the oral presentation for both groups. As the only difference between both classes was the exchanges which took place only in the experimental group's class, this seems to suggest that the exchange had some positive impact on the written project. Both groups' oral presentations were strongly related to the post-test, which should be expected as students with higher grades in the oral part generally also have higher grades in the exam. Even though the students in the experimental group had higher scores in the post-test, which suggests higher language improvement, the correlation between class and the post-test is a negative and significant to some extent correlation and only in the experimental group. This negative correlation requires further research to be explained.

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation Scores of Class Performance, Written Project and Post-test

	Class	Written Project	Oral Presentation
Written Project C	0,03		
Oral Presentation C	0,18	-0,17	
Post-test C	0,06	-0,20	0,47*
Written Project Ex	0,58*		
Oral presentation Ex	-0,26	-0,06	
Post-test Ex	-0,31	-0,18	0,51*

4. Students' Perceptions

Analysis of the questionnaire, which consisted in 4-rating questions to explore their perceptions about the exchange, showed that the students' level of satisfaction was very high. 52% of the students considered it a good experience and 37% a very good experience. 79% considered they had made improvements. More importantly, 59% thought they might use it after the course. This fact can be estimated as an important way of promoting life-long learning since the students finished their degree that year and these exchanges (and there are some platforms where they can be continued) may be their way to continue developing their language skills. Lastly, and quite relevant for the lecturers, 93% of the class selected the top grade for their feeling of fulfilment of their most demanded need, speaking.

Table 3. Answers to questionnaire

	1 No/thing	2 Little	3 Good	4 Very good
Positive experience	7%	3%	52%	37%
Improvements	11%	11%	42%	37%
Likelihood of use after the course	19%	22%	40%	19%
Perceived need fulfilled	0%	7%	30%	63%

The same conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the student's entries in their diaries. As it has been mentioned, in the diary entries they explained their experiences and reflected about them analysing the best and worst aspects. The experience was very positive; they learnt about another culture, they had to explain things about Spain and themselves in a real context, so the activity and the language were authentic and for an authentic purpose. They all highlighted that it had been very good for improving their feeling of self-esteem and self-efficacy because they were able to communicate in the language and they saw other learners also struggle to speak in English.

Although the general feeling was positive, the students also mentioned some negative aspects in the exchanges. They thought they had to spend too much time trying to connect, which could have been better used for practice. They felt very disappointed if their partner was absent one day and found it difficult to start the exchange with a new partner. Some students felt they would have been more comfortable if they had had selected topics and specific questions to talk about because sometimes they did not know what to talk about.

5. Lecturer's Perceptions

From the lecturer's records, it can be inferred that students were more time on task in the exchanges than in speaking activities in the control group, they were eager to talk and there was more production of language and more phonological repair moves when breakdowns in communication happened. The activity was more authentic and the language produced was also freer and improved over the sessions. The students gained confidence in their ability to explain themselves in English throughout the sessions. The exchanges had a positive impact in the motivation of the group and in the rest of the skills as shown in both the diaries entries and the lecturer's records. There was a reduction of the stress of talking because of anonymity and learner autonomy and fluency were developed as it was shown in the lecturer's records of both the exchanges and the speaking activities in class.

The main drawbacks of the exchanges, according to the lecture, were technical glitches when the programme, the earphones or the connections did not work. Some of the conversations were not very good because students ran out of topics. There were some mismatches in level and the Turkish students were more fluent, which made some Spanish students very scared to talk. There was a lot of time wasted while getting connected and some students spent most of the time trying to get a new partner when students in Turkey were absent.

6. Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn from the previous study. Considering the first research question of whether the oral exchanges would be as effective as problem-solving speaking activities or more in promoting speaking proficiency, the answer should be "no" as it has been shown in Table 1. According to the results, there does not seem to be more improvement in the experimental group in oral proficiency although it must be noted that maybe some more specific measurements of oral proficiency should be carried out in future research. Regarding the second research question of whether the students would speak and negotiate meaning more, the answer should be "yes," as there is definitely an improvement in speaking time, time on task and negotiation of meaning as it was shown in the lecturer's records. As to the third question, if the oral exchanges would have any effect in their achievement grades at the end of the semester, the answer should also be yes as it was shown in their achievement grades, which increased notably. Regarding whether there would be any transfer from oral to written proficiency achievement, the Pearson's correlation coefficient seems to indicate a strong relationship between the written project and the grade of class attendance and work only for the experimental group. However, this conclusion should be considered very tentative, as there could be other factors within the grade for class attendance and work accounting for this. As regards the last question of whether the oral exchanges would improve their motivation and create a higher feeling of improvement, the answer should be definitely "yes".

Summing up, we should say that the exchange, which has been repeated the following years, was a very positive experience proving that it is possible to exploit technological tools in English language classes with a high degree of success. Particularly, Internet telephoning tools may provide valuable exposure and learning opportunities for language learners if used purposefully as they provide authentic language input and opportunities for negotiation of meaning and demonstrate more advantages and positive impact on language than disadvantages.

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